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George Parker Winship.



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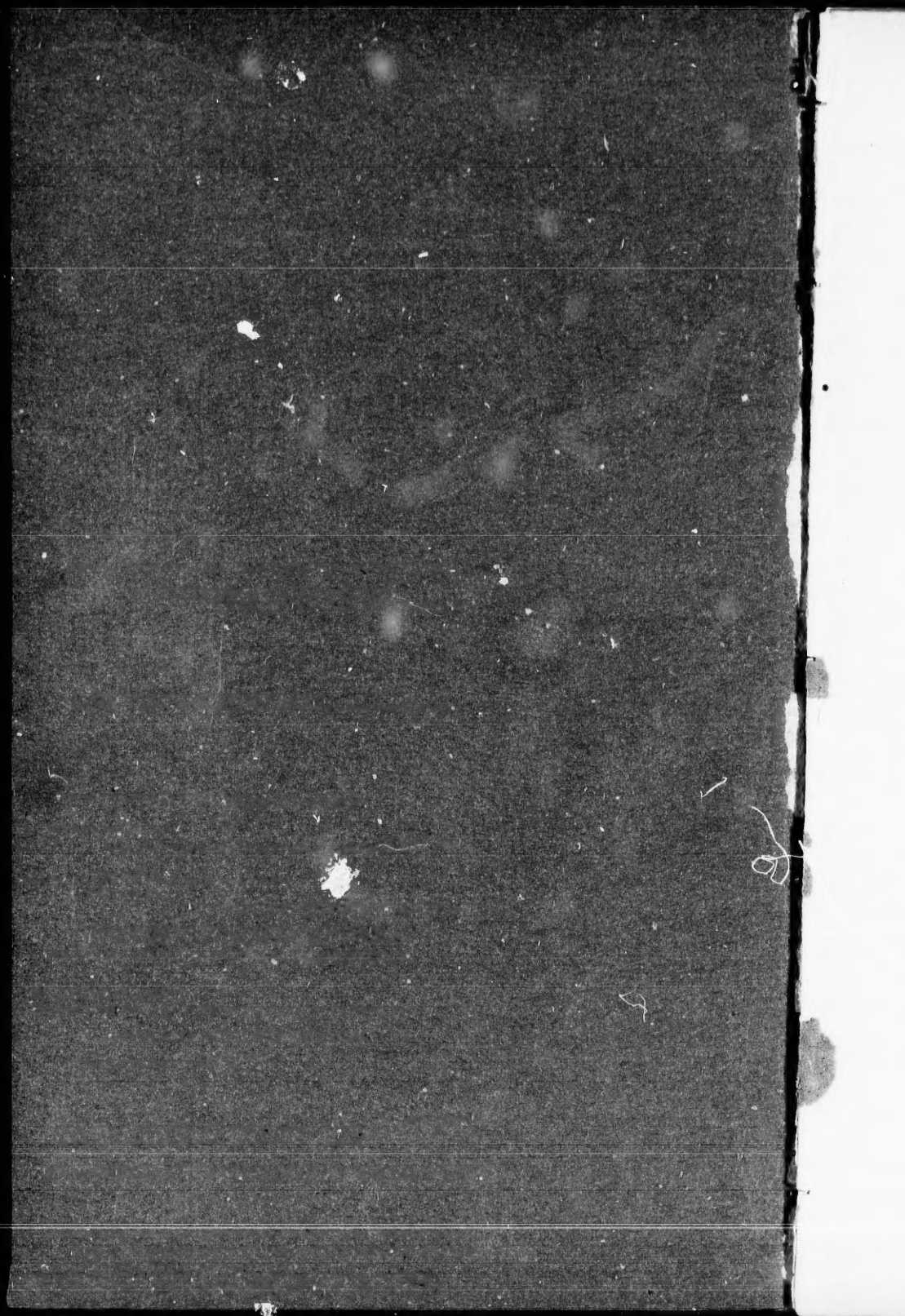
JOHN CABOT AND THE STUDY OF SOURCES.

BY

GEORGE PARKER WINSHIP, A. M.

(From the Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1897, pages 35-41.)

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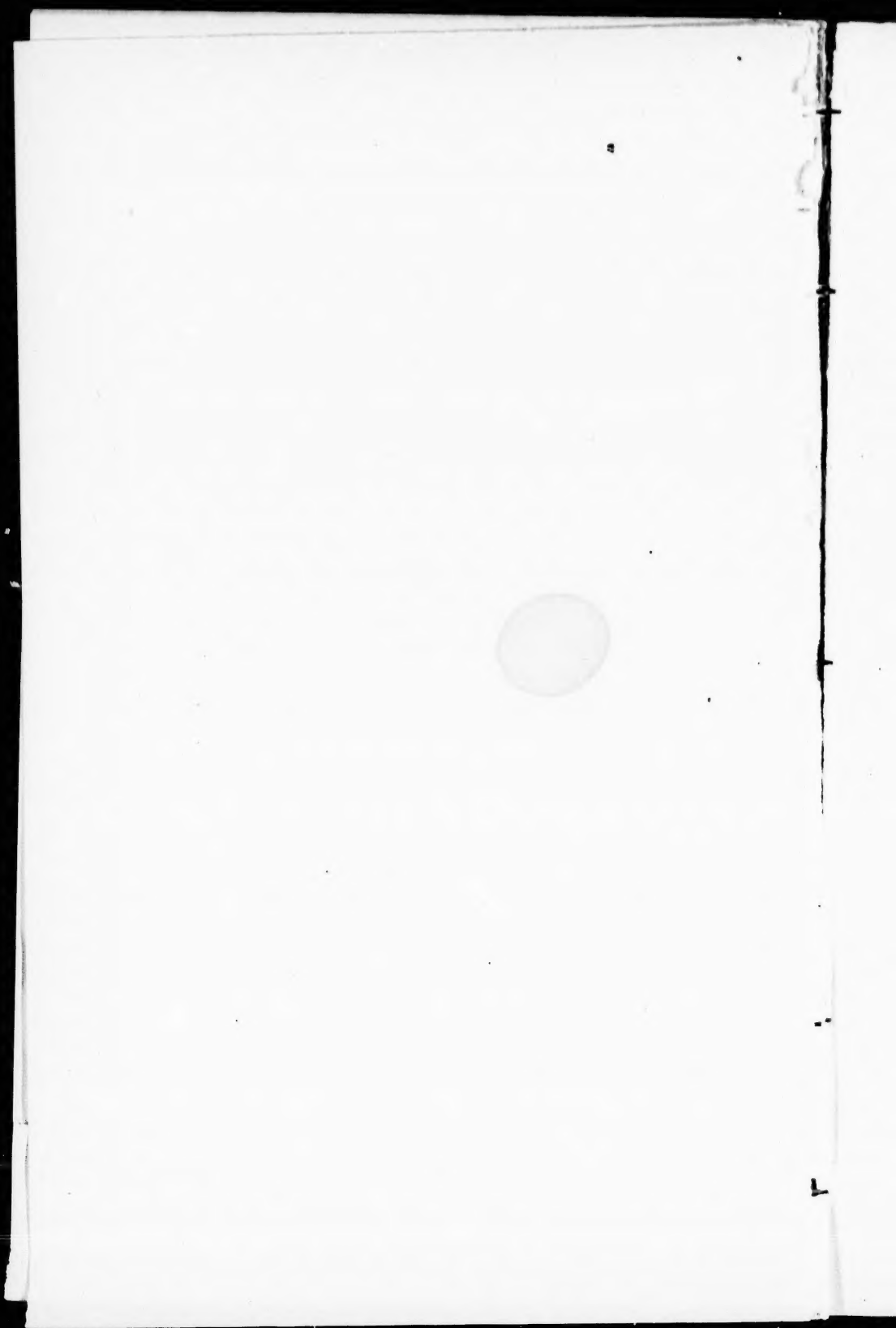
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IV.—JOHN CABOT AND THE STUDY OF SOURCES.

By GEORGE PARKER WINSHIP, A. M.,
PROVIDENCE, R. I.



JOHN CABOT AND THE STUDY OF SOURCES.

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The North American continent was discovered by John Cabot, who had a son Sebastian, before the 10th of August, 1497. In the following spring, of 1498, John Cabot was authorized to continue his explorations on behalf of England, and there are reasons for believing that an expedition to the new western world was undertaken under his direction. What are the sources of our information in regard to the details of these two voyages?

The earliest printed reference to the discovery made by Cabot was published half a century after the date of the voyage. Some years earlier, in 1516, Peter Martyr published an account of a voyage by a Cabot, and this account was reprinted, circulated widely, and was frequently copied. Other accounts, giving various details of a voyage by Cabot to the north and west, were published by Ramusio, an Italian correspondent of Sebastian Cabot; by Richard Eden, who knew the younger Cabot intimately; by Gomara, Galvano, Oviedo, and by others who were not only contemporary with Sebastian Cabot, but who lived in the same places and moved in the same professional circles with him. During the second half of this sixteenth century the English chroniclers, Grafton, Holinshed, Fabyan and Stow, Hakluyt and Herrera published accounts of the Cabot voyage, several of which contain statements that do not occur elsewhere. All of these writers were well acquainted with men who had been associated with the younger Cabot. The books which they published are the authority for a large part of what has been written about the periods of which they treat.

The statements in these printed books often differ materially from one another. Not one of the writers describes more than

a single voyage by Cabot to the northwest, and the descriptions given are often mutually impossible. Not one of them reports that Sebastian ever spoke of any voyage made by his father. Hence it has been deduced that Sebastian was a braggart and a liar, who persistently strove to secure for himself the credit of his father's achievements. And therefore, to complete the argument, it is stated that Sebastian never achieved anything of importance by himself, and that he was not competent to accomplish anything.

The direct connection with the Cabots ceases after 1600. For the next two hundred years their discovery is frequently mentioned by succeeding voyagers, by historians, and by sermonizers. Occasionally one of these ventured to draw some inference from the confusion of the earlier writers, but the impression which this confusion made upon students and the public was fairly stated by Burke in 1757, when he wrote: "We (English) derive our rights in America from the discovery by Sebastian Cabot, * * * but the particulars are not known distinctly enough to encourage me to enter into the details of his voyage."

The confused tangle which had grown out of the earlier printed narratives has been cleared away by the finding of manuscript sources, recovered from the storehouses of documentary material. The first of these sources was made known by Richard Biddle, a Pittsburg lawyer, who printed in 1831 a document which proved that there had been two Cabot voyages of discovery. A few years later Rawdon Brown found in Venice a letter written from London in 1497, which describes the effect produced by the return of Cabot in August of that year. Rawdon Brown in Italy, and Bergenroth in Spain, carried on the search for historic manuscript material, and by 1870 a half dozen letters and official reports had been found, dated in 1497 and 1498, in which Cabot is mentioned, and which repeat some of the current gossip about his voyages and his future plans. Besides the public and private archives and record offices, search was made in manuscript letter books, privy purse and other account books, files of court and municipal records, and similar sources of historical information. From these have been recovered a good many references to the two Cabots in Italy, England, and Spain. For the most part these give little more than a name and a date, but this is enough to establish the whereabouts of the Cabots at specific

periods, and oftentimes this determines the trustworthiness of other more general accounts of their doings. Taken together, they furnish a body of evidence sometimes very significant, capable of being used in the formation of an estimate of the character of the younger Cabot.

Just as a single document found in the London record office in 1830 proved that there was no longer any need of crowding all the events of the Cabotian story into the course of a single voyage, so the finding of an old map in the library of a Bavarian curate in 1843 gave us a direct statement, apparently made by Sebastian Cabot himself in 1544, crediting his father with the discovery of North America. Similarly, within a few months, some memoranda of the customs collectors in old Bristol have been found among the Westminster muniments, which are said to prove that John Cabot was in England in the autumn of 1498 or 1499. Before the discovery of this manuscript no mention of the existence of John Cabot after the departure of the expedition in the spring of 1498 had been known. Hence it had been inferred by nearly every writer upon the Cabots that the father died before that expedition returned, so that all the glory of that voyage descended upon his son. If John Cabot was alive in England in 1499, a considerable portion of all that has been written about the Cabots loses its value as a statement of truth, but its value is correspondingly increased to the student of how history is made.

Mr. Biddle found the explanation of the printed accounts in the manuscript sources. He was also the first to interpret these sources of Cabotian history; to erect inferential structures out of the presumptions which might be drawn from these sources. As it seems to me, the most important portion of the whole body of Cabot literature is that which reveals the mental processes by which the eulogists and the detractors of Sebastian Cabot have reached their conclusions. Almost equally interesting are the arguments and the secondary inferences by which every writer who has trusted to the professed authorities has been drawn deeper and deeper into the toils which await the writer of historical essays and historical addresses.

Ramusio in Venice printed his recollections of what he had once heard at a house-party in Verona, where a chance acquaintance told of a conversation with Sebastian Cabot many years before in Seville. Ramusio's narration does not

mention John Cabot; hence, argues one authority, Sebastian was guilty of unfilial falsehood. Henry VII gave John Cabot a charter in March, 1496, and seventeen months later John Cabot returned to London. Bristol ships traded to Iceland, and therefore, says an Oxford investigator, Cabot spent the winter of 1496-97 in Iceland. Somewhere it is stated that the Cabot landfall was 50° north latitude. Hence a right reverend bishop declares his belief that Cabot first saw the soil of North America at Cape St. John, across which runs the line of 50° north, according to the perfected instruments of 1897.

And much more of the same sort of argument from the honest essays of men, each of whom fairly deserves the serious respect and consideration of fellow-students—much more of equal interest to us who believe that an historian ought, first of all, to possess common sense and some appreciation of how men and women are likely to act and think.

I want to plead for the study of the Cabot question, not by you, college teachers, whose historical training and developed instincts might be so much more usefully employed, but by the scores of young men and women who come to you, anxious to study history, filled with enthusiasm for the subject and confident of their graduated ability to understand what older men and women have done and are doing. I wish that every would-be historian could begin his professional training by preparing for an examination on what has been known and what might be known about John and Sebastian Cabot. The history written afterwards would be marked less often than now by blind quotation from the "Sources," and less by illogical conclusions maintained by baseless inferences and unwarranted assumptions.

NOTES.

The American History Leaflet No. IX, New York, Lovell, May 1893, (10 cents), contains an English translation of the important sources of information regarding the Cabot voyage of 1497. These were reprinted, edited by Professor Channing of Harvard, from the Hakluyt Society volume, "The Journal of Columbus and Documents relating to the Voyages of John Cabot and Gaspar Cortereal," edited by Sir Clements Markham, London 1893. The narratives and documents printed by Hakluyt in 1599 are reprinted in Old South Leaflet No. 37, Boston, Old South Church, 1895 (5 cents), with a note by the editor, Mr. Edwin D. Mead.

For the student of the methods of historical investigation an invaluable text-book is Mr. Henry Harrisse's "John Cabot the Discoverer of North

America, and Sebastian his Son," London, B. F. Stevens, 1896. This work is "a laboratory manual, in which the student finds revealed each step of the processes through which the material of history has been forced in order that it might be made to render up the truth which was contained within it." Mr. Harris printed in his "Jean et Sébastien Cabot," Paris, Leroux, 1882, the original texts—Italian, Spanish, Latin, and English—of the important sources referring to the Cabots. A comparison of these two volumes gives a most suggestive illustration of the processes by which an insight into the significance of historical data is developed.

The chapter by Charles Deane, in Winsor, "Narrative and Critical History of America," Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1884, III. 1-58, contains a comprehensive survey of the Cabot sources and the secondary authorities. This was supplemented by Mr. Winsor in a paper, "Cabot Controversies," Cambridge 1896, read before the Massachusetts Historical Association in November 1896, and printed in its Proceedings, second series, XI. 156-169.

A Cabot Bibliography, by G. P. Winship, London, H. N. Stevens, 1897, will contain comments upon the contents and the value of the books which may be used to advantage by students of the Cabot questions.